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WORKING GROUP ON ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES

BACKGROUND

The United States and Mexico have worked together for more than 60 years to address environmental and natural resource problems. Many of the activities of the Environment and Natural Resources Working Group are focused on addressing issues on the U.S.-Mexico border, where the impact of rapid industrialization and population growth has exacerbated pressures on natural resources and the environment. Most of the agencies involved in the working group are also engaged in other cooperative programs to address broader hemispheric or global issues. The Working Group on Environment and Natural Resources includes participants from Mexico's Secretariat for Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior, the USDA Forest Service, and the Department of Justice.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The U.S.-Mexico Border XXI program was carried out during the 1995-2000 period. The two countries have taken steps to review the program and identify approaches for improving binational environmental cooperation in the border area. One particular aspect of the Border XXI program, the U.S.-Mexico Joint Contingency Plans, established a foundation for cooperative efforts regarding prevention, preparedness, mitigation and response to hazardous substance releases in the border area. To date, six sister plans have been developed. By the end of 2001, there will be three additional Sister City plans completed in El Paso, Texas / Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; Columbus, New Mexico / Puerto Las Palomas, Chihuahua; and Douglas, Arizona / Agua Prieta, Sonora.

The Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) and the North American Development Bank (NADB) have been supporting the preservation, protection and improvement of the border environment to improve the welfare of the population of Mexico and the United States, particularly through the development of environmental infrastructure projects in the region. With support from the institutions, 35 projects are under construction or in operation, serving more than 7 million people in the border area. The United States and Mexico have launched discussions on how to improve the performance of both the BECC and the NADB in achieving their mission.

Significant work is being done on a bilateral basis and jointly with Canada to promote the safe use of pesticides and to reduce risks to farm workers

EPA and SEMARNAT announced that they are working to finalize an agreement with the state of Veracruz to initiate a cooperative pilot project to monitor and assess ecological conditions of the Gulf of Mexico.

Natural Resource Management agencies within USDA, including the Forest Service, have collaborated with SEMARNAT and other government institutions in Mexico on the sustainable management of forests and other natural resources. Both countries support the development and implementation of criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management, at the national level (Montreal Process) and local level.

With the signing of the agreement between the National Institute of Ecology (INE) and the National Park Service (NPS), joint efforts on natural protected areas have been advanced, especially in the sister parks of Chiricahua National Monument and Coronado National Memorial with Ajos Bavispe Reserve and Wildlife Refuge. These efforts have supported the advancement of fire fighting, ecotourism, monitoring, environmental restoration and education, and the development of rural communities, among others.

Mexico considers that there is a pending area of collaboration with regard to joint actions to conserve and restore the Colorado River Delta.

PLAN OF ACTION FOR BNC 2002

EPA and SEMARNAT have agreed to work closely with their state partners to develop by 2002 a new and results oriented plan for border environmental activities. The plan will assist border communities to meet national standards and to help meet their needs for environmental infrastructure. While the new plan is being developed the activities of the existing workgroups will continue. Administrator Whitman and Secretary Lichtinger agreed to meet on the border in October to begin this process.

The two countries will work to increase the participation of the private sector through such initiatives as the Seven Principles of Environmental Stewardship. These initiatives should take into account the policies and strategies of the new administrations and should strive for mutual acknowledgment of the efforts of industry on both sides of the border.

The existing U.S.-Mexico Binational Air Workgroup will meet as soon as practicable to examine ways of assuring that new energy projects in the border are consistent with applicable environmental regulatory structures and that they do not cause unacceptable impacts to border communities. They also will continue discussing procedures for mitigation and new source notification. Administrator Whitman and Secretary Lichtinger have asked the Binational Air Workgroup to inform the international offices of EPA and SEMARNAT by the end of 2001 about progress on both issues.

Mexico considers it important to implement joint actions for the conservation and restoration of the Gulf of Mexico. Additionally, Mexico has proposed to identify the means and actions to establish an effective collaboration to restore and preserve the Colorado River Delta. DOI and SEMARNAT will initiate a dialogue on this issue in the near future.

EPA and SEMARNAT will compile from existing information an inventory of contaminated sites within the 100 km border zone on each side of the border. EPA will continue to assist local communities in remediating and redeveloping contaminated property in the border area. The U.S.-Mexico Chamber of Commerce will be working with industries on the border to implement voluntary environmental management and to begin making environmental performance data available to the public. EPA and SEMARNAT will be working on a Binational Compliance Assistance web site for transporters of hazardous wastes between the United States and Mexico. The web site will link to existing EPA and PROFEPA web pages and will provide information in both English and Spanish.

Mexico announced activities aimed at encouraging and facilitating private sector investment in environmental infrastructure and technologies, through training, information exchange, and improved procedures. The United States is eager to work with Mexico to promote these efforts.

The United States and Mexico will strengthen cooperation between sister natural protected areas, acknowledging that these ecosystems extend beyond political boundaries.

The United States and Mexico will continue to be involved in developing and implementing criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management. By 2003, both countries will issue national reports. During the next year, the forestry agencies expect to develop a framework for a national forest monitoring system to be implemented by the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) in Mexico. This effort will build upon existing work in the State of Jalisco by the North American Forest Commission and the USDA Forest Service. The USDA Forest Service will continue to cooperate with Mexican authorities in strengthening response systems and conducting training for fire suppression as well as promoting research on fire ecology.

The USDA Forest Service will work closely with CONAFOR to promote the conservation and sustainable use of forestry resources.

FUTURE PLAN OF ACTION

Each agency involved in this working group is committed to strengthening and expanding existing cooperative programs and to building long term relations with key stakeholders such as the border states to assure the future sustainability of the U.S.-Mexico border and to protect public health and essential ecosystems in both countries.

For this purpose, the countries commit to developing cooperative environmental mechanisms that are informed by careful review of recent and existing experiences and institutional arrangements. These mechanisms will be developed in close cooperation with non-federal partners and stakeholders, with the aim of ensuring that stewardship of the border area's natural resources is effective, efficient, and equitable.